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ABSTRACT

Three collaborative writing faculty projects which were designed and put into effect at Santa Clara University are peer advising, composition seminars, and inter-active observation. Peer advising matched faculty members who had previously taught in the writing program on campus with instructors new to the program to serve as professional resources as well as social contacts. Composition seminars, intended to help the professional growth of writing instructors, were held monthly. These are joint presentations by colleagues who share a common interest in composition topics. The third project, a series of inter-active observations designed to enhance the performance of individual writing instructors, began by concentrating on areas the instructor wished to learn more about were also developed. Even though most writing instructors are aware that collaborative activities characterized by open-ended discussions yield greater conceptual understanding and enhance intellectual engagement, and use these tasks in their classrooms, they rarely afford themselves the same opportunity. Limited time, independent rather than interdependent faculty relations, and maintenance learning all limit ongoing collegial exchange. Collaborative projects encourage writing instructors to pool skills in order to solve problems and answer questions collectively. In fact, collaborative projects such as these, emphasizing self-determination and cooperation, can provide all writing instructors the opportunity to exchange ideas, to take a stance, and to locate themselves in the ongoing dialogue about writing, teaching, and learning. (Eleven references are attached.) (RAE)

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Reinforcing Successive Gains:

Collaborative Writing Faculty Projects

Many of us are well aware of the benefits of collaborative learning for our students. We know that collaborative activities aiming for practical knowledge prove useful because they work against student anxiety and boredom, and thus foster greater class participation. We suspect that collaborative activities characterized by open-ended discussions yield greater conceptual understanding and enhance intellectual engagement. Using these tasks in our classes, we often afford our students the opportunity to work together as learners.

Rarely, however, do we afford ourselves the same opportunity (Garver 247). Why is it that although we encourage our students to discuss and explore the intellectual concepts and questions that inform their lives, we often remain silent about those that inform our own?

This paper offers reasons why there is not more ongoing collegial exchange and suggests ways that writing programs can foster it.

Given the demands of teaching writing -- student conferences, peer editing, group response editing, draft assessments, individual goal setting, and grading -- there is

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little time for ongoing collegial exchange.

Beyond this, however, colleges and universities have traditionally been loosely organized. As a result, faculty have functioned far more "independently than interdependently" (Johnson and Johnson 27), more competitively than cooperatively. Individuals have, in other words, worked by themselves to accomplish goals not necessarily related to the goals of others. So, for example, writing instructors may keep current with the field: we may expand our notion of writing to include reading logs, focused free writes, and micro-themes; we may try out exotic heuristics; we may recast assignments and rethink assessments. But more often than not, we do so independently of each other, without benefit of a forum to publicly discuss our models or ideas about teaching. Within such a context, as educational researchers Johnson and Johnson point out, we may well come to "believe that [our] rewards are based only on [our] own performance" (28). If the successes or failures that our colleagues experience have no relevance to us as professionals, then discussion about these experiences -- that is, on-going collegial exchange -- appears irrelevant as well.

Limited collegial exchange is also understandable if we remember that notions about how students learn often run counter to those about how teachers learn. In American higher education, we often assume that if we know a subject, we can teach it. Learning about teaching is, thus, not encouraged, if it is considered at all. Instead, believing that the problems and questions associated with teaching will disappear as competent

scholars and practitioners ease past their initial nervousness, universities and colleges encourage faculty to become maintenance learners (Bennis and Nanus 193).

As such, we acquire, value, and use information that maintains traditional views of teaching. In fact, we may shape new information to fit more traditional models. For instance, many of us teach writing as a process, but even as we do so, we break the process into units, and thus fall back to old patterns and teach old systems of composing. We tell our students to find a subject and to explore it systematically; we tell them to write an unambiguous thesis, make an outline, create the lead sentence of an engaging introductory paragraph, draw a conclusion, and edit the text. We may teach writing in this way suspecting all the time that such an approach to writing as process makes it no longer a process at all. Disatisfied though we may be with the approach, we may continue to use it because we have little time and opportunity to rethink it or discuss changing it with others who have similar concerns. So, we continue to do what we have always done with little reflection and little discussion.

Limited time, independent rather than interdependent faculty relations, and maintenance learning all limit ongoing collegial exchange. But if, as Kenneth Bruffee argues, knowledge is "the product of continual exchange or conversation" (12), then we would do well to encourage more of it within our writing programs. At Santa Clara University, collegial projects have, in fact, encouraged discussion among writing instructors, thus extending their knowledge about teaching writing.

At Santa Clara, we have designed three collaborative

projects which work well in combination: peer advising, composition seminars, and inter-active observation.

Peer advising is a collegial project that matches faculty members who have previously taught in the writing program on our campus with instructors new to it. As such, peer advising offers new instructors -- and particularly part-timers who might otherwise feel isolated -- the opportunity to meet faculty who have taught writing before, and who may serve as professional resources as well as social contacts.

There are problems with this type of collaboration, of course. First, the amount and quality of advice can be inconsistent. Some advisors simply know what to say: they offer useful advice and ample information; what's more, they know when to offer it and when to keep silent. On the other hand, some advisors -- either because of disposition or idiosyncratic teaching styles -- simply don't know what to say or when to stop saying it; they offer too little advice that is practical or too much that is theoretical; frequently, they offer no assistance at all.

Some of these problems may be avoided if the peer advising program coordinator calls for advisors who are willing volunteers, not victims pressed into service. Program coordinators might also take the background, training, and experience of all participants into consideration when pairing advisors and advisees. For instance, I try to match the publishing poets on our composition faculty with incoming instructors who have similar interests. Or I often match

graduates of the same schools or training programs because I assume that at least initially such a common bond will encourage a freer, thus more productive, exchange. To insure as much exposure to as many writing instructors as possible, I also try to make certain that peer advisors and advisees are not office mates. Finally, coordinators should discuss the possibilities and the goals of peer advising with all participants. I try to make it clear that because our program accomodates a wide variety of teaching styles and methods, peer advising can range from spontaneous questions between classes to lunches in the faculty club to classroom observation exchanges. I also emphasize that whatever the means, the end peer advising seeks on our campus is a free exchange of information ranging from nitty-gritty grading policies to larger issues of curriculum and pedagogy.

The second collegial project that our writing program sponsors is the composition seminar series. Intended to enrich writing instructors, monthly seminars are joint presentations by colleagues who share a common interest in topics of professional concern. Seminar topics have ranged from cognitive development and assignment design to the relation between critical reading and writing. Because these topics are selected by all writing instructors, the seminars themselves usually wind up as informal discussions rather than formal presentations. People thus freely share ideas and questions so that they can learn from each other for the next time around.

Nevertheless, there are problems, the most significant of which is guaranteeing that the seminars are worthwhile to as many writing instructors as possible. On our campus, we have an

interesting mix: some instructors are most interested in practical classroom methods; others prefer to discuss the pedagogical assumptions that inform those methods. Efforts have been made to explore the distinctions and the connections, to discuss how, for example, writing assignment design can foster cognitive growth in our students. These efforts, however, are not always successful.

Nevertheless, the major assumption of the seminars is that professional growth in teaching is a slow process, requiring the development of "complex understandings and skills" (Wildman and Niles 5). Viewing the teacher as learner in this way accounts for the continuing effort of these seminars to develop teaching expertise. In addition, it explains the major goal of the seminars: to encourage writing instructors to become innovative learners who continually expand and test their knowledge (Bennis and Nanus 213). The seminars can, in fact, expand instructors' levels of expertise by providing new ideas about teaching as well as a forum for testing those ideas. For example, one of our most successful seminars this year tested ways that writing tasks can be integrated with one another and sequenced so that they correlate with the events and problems that students experience as they move through their undergraduate education. As educational researchers Terry Wildman and Jerry Niles point out, a collaborative gathering such as this one can also break "the grip of psychological isolation" by furnishing the emotional support and encouragement we all need to cope with the challenges of learning to teach well (8).

The third collegial project that SCU's composition program sponsors is inter-active observation. The main concern that most people have about classroom observation is how the resulting information will be used. When I designed the inter-active observation program on our campus, I made it clear that the program aimed to enhance rather than to evaluate the performance of individual writing instructors. I insist that the program be kept completely separate from the evaluation process and that all information remain confidential.

I also make the major goals of the program as explicit and public as possible: to refine teaching methods, to foster professional dialogue, and to encourage writing instructors to think more systematically about their work. The major assumption of the program is "that teachers acquire and deepen . . . habits of self-initiated reflection about their teaching when they have opportunities to discuss and practice these skills" (Garmston 20).

To give them this opportunity, I serve as a peer coach for writing instructors participating in the inter-active observation program. Following a discussion of the course design, the writing instructor and I collaborate in setting observation objectives that build on the instructor's strengths, interests, and talents.

For example, when one instructor worked with her students in individual conferences, she was particularly effective in helping them to think more critically about their writing and its possible impact on an audience. She wanted to develop strategies that would foster the same engagement in a classroom setting. I

first sat in on several of her conferences and then observed her writing classes. Based on these observations and our discussions, I was able to help her design a series of questions that encourages her students to assess their own writing and to set revision goals based on the assessment.

Thus, this series of inter-active observations concentrated on areas the instructor wished to learn more about. To enhance that learning, I simply gathered infomation about classroom and conference activities. Together, the instructor and I analyzed and interpreted the information. We judged how certain strategies she used affected her students' learning and how these strategies could be applied to other teaching contexts.

Peer advising, composition seminars, and inter-active observations encourage Santa Clara University writing instructors to pool skills in order to solve problems and answer questions collectively that would dismay us if we worked alone. In fact, collaborative projects such as these, emphasizing self-determination and cooperation, can provide all writing instructors the opportunity to exchange ideas, to take a stance, to locate themselves in the ongoing dialogue about writing, teaching, and learning.

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